

STUDY OF TRUANCY AND SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION

(FIRST YEAR)

STUDY PLAN

Study Mandate

- During the 2008 General Assembly Session, Delegate Franklin P. Hall introduced House Bill 1263, which required local school boards to implement school dropout prevention programs and services which emphasize truancy prevention. The bill would also amend the Code to address compliance with the compulsory school attendance law to strengthen the authority of local school boards. Members of the House Education Committee reviewed the bill and determined that further study of these issues would be appropriate. The Committee forwarded a letter from Delegate Hall requesting the Commission on Youth, in conjunction with the Department of Education, to study the provisions set forth in House Bill 1263. In order to accomplish this request, the Commission on Youth will need to:
 - review state laws and policies relating to the enforcement of compulsory school attendance, truancy and dropout prevention for consistency and clarity;
 - review current initiatives overseen by the Board of Education and the Department of Education addressing truancy, attendance and dropout prevention;
 - evaluate local school division policies regarding enforcement of school attendance and assess the need for conformity, including consistency within school divisions, regarding enforcement of statutory attendance policies;
 - evaluate the new certification data which will be submitted by local school divisions in the Fall of 2008 which demonstrate compliance with compulsory school attendance laws;
 - review existing local practices that are in place which address truancy and dropout prevention in each school division;
 - assess factors related to the causes of academic underachievement, chronic truancy and school dropout and determine whether such students should also be considered “children in need of services” for compulsory school attendance purposes;
 - consider the need and efficacy of defining “truancy” and “chronic truancy” in the Code of Virginia;
 - attempt to ascertain the impact of suspensions, expulsions and other disciplinary actions on school dropout rates and, to the extent possible, ascertain whether disciplined students receive educational, social and community services during their suspension or expulsion from school; and
 - recommend to the General Assembly such changes to state law and public policies and such other initiatives appropriate and necessary to implement a comprehensive approach to chronic truancy and dropout prevention.

Identified Issues

- Chronic truancy and school dropout rates continue to be critical problems nationally and in the Commonwealth.

- Educators, parents, community leaders and policymakers at all levels of government have focused attention on the need to address the academic achievement gap and the declining high school graduation rate.
- Truancy affects students of all ages, communities, backgrounds and school divisions; unexcused absences from school are linked to numerous harmful social and personal consequences, among them academic failure, school dropout rates, crime and violence, unemployment, substance abuse, adult criminality and incarceration, unwanted pregnancy and social isolation.
- The number of students in the Commonwealth experiencing academic failure and leaving school before graduation has begun to climb, and in certain areas of the Commonwealth school division dropout rates exceed the annual state and national dropout rates.
- Data reveal that a disproportionate number of poor, urban, and minority youth drop out of school each year, and that factors associated with school dropout are also linked to chronic truancy.
- Students who are chronic truants and school dropouts may be children in need of supervision, children in need of services, or both.
- The personal and social costs of dropping out of school have increased, and the gap between dropouts and high school graduates is widening as opportunities are increasing for higher skilled workers and are disappearing for the less skilled.
- Declining graduation rates threaten Virginia's economic stability and present significant challenges to the nation's ability to maintain a competitive advantage among industrialized nations.
- In 2006, the General Assembly mandated through HB 19 (Fralin) that the Board of Education adopt a formula, with consideration of the National Governors Association recommendations, to collect, analyze and report high school graduation and dropout data. The legislation seeks to improve the collection, calculation, and interpretation of dropout data to effect greater consistency and quality in pupil accounting and reporting practices; however, comparable data pertaining to truants is not available.
- Over the years, Virginia's laws have been amended to address truancy and dropout prevention; however, it is necessary to examine relevant state laws to provide sufficient authority to public schools, parents, law enforcement, and the court system to deal with compulsory school attendance, chronic truancy, and school dropout prevention, and to ensure consistency and clarity between pertinent state laws and public policies.
- It is imperative that bold, aggressive steps be taken immediately to protect the public investment.

Study Activities

Year One

- Convene Workgroup
 - Invite a representative from impacted groups

Secretary of Education
 Superintendent of Public Instruction
 Virginia Department of Education
 Virginia School Boards Association
 Virginia Association of School Superintendents
 Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals
 Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police
 Virginia School Safety Center
 Court Service Unit Representatives
 School Attendance Officers
 Alternative Education Representatives

Board of Education
 Virginia PTA
 Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice
 Virginia Education Association
 Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals
 Virginia Counselors Association
 Educators/Guidance Counselor
 School Resource Officers
 Sheriff's Association
 Virginia Supreme Court

- Conduct site visits of selected school divisions having high student dropout rates and also with model school divisions with a low percentage of student dropouts.
 - Identify a cross section of school divisions that serve rural, urban and suburban populations.
 - Schedule interviews with impacted stakeholders within the school division, including the school superintendent or their designee, the principal/assistant principal, PTA/PTO representatives, juvenile court judges, school resource officers, court service unit staff, alternative educators, law enforcement and community representatives.
- Review federal legislation/policy.
 - No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
 - Proposed rule modifying graduation rate formula
 - Federal initiatives impacting school resource officers
- Review Virginia laws.
 - Truancy and compulsory education statutes
- Review studies/initiatives conducted within Virginia addressing truancy and the dropout rate.
- Compare data on suspensions, expulsions, and other disciplinary actions taken by school division to school dropout rates.
- Determine the return rate of students to school after disciplinary actions are taken.
- Investigate the need and feasibility of establishing Special Middle Schools for over age middle school students.
- Analyze Virginia practices.
 - Interview impacted stakeholders.
 - School Superintendents
 - Attendance Officers
 - Court Service Unit Staff
 - Juvenile Court Judges
 - Youth, their parents and caregivers
 - Review state and local Code of Student Conduct provisions.
 - Review school boards' truancy policies.
 - Evaluate the duties of school attendance officers as provided by state law.
 - Review dropout data across the Commonwealth by school division.
 - Review dropout data by schools.
 - Develop any preliminary findings and recommendations.
 - Present findings and recommendations to the Commission on Youth.

Year Two

- Conduct analysis of Virginia practices (continued from Year One).
- Conduct extensive background and literature reviews.
 - Other states' initiatives and policies
 - National study of dropout rates
- Identify cross sample of school divisions and examine truancy policies and dropout data.
- Synthesize findings of statutory review and workgroup recommendations.
- Solicit feedback to recommendations from constituents and DOE/Board of Education.
- Refine findings and recommendations.
- Present findings and recommendations to the Commission on Youth.
- Prepare final report.